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CREDULITY,

AS ILLUSTRATED BY

IMPOSTURES IN SCIENCE, GROSS SUPERSTITIONS,

AND

FANATICISM.

BY JAMES M. MACDONALD.

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To some extent, the performance, here presented to the public, will be seen to bear the form and character of a spoken discourse. The Author has not attempted wholly to obliterate the style of an address to an auditory; but prefers to indicate that such it originally was, and thus avoid the labor of modifying many passages, and wholly excluding others. It is published from the belief that something upon this subject would be timely. And though it is the mere outline of a great subject, the Author is encouraged to hope that, like those light seeds which the wind scatters, its diminutive character will favor its wider circulation.

Jamaica, L. I., March 21, 1843.



HINTS ON CREDULITY.

“MY bane—my antidote”—are the words which Addison puts into the mouth of the virtuous Roman, Cato, when he laid down Plato’s book on the immortality of the soul, and gazed upon the sword, already drawn, with which he meditated to take away his life. At the sight of the usurpations which struck at the very pillars of the Commonwealth, and gave fearful omen that the sacred temple would ere long fall, he became, like his renowned compatriot, the vanquished hero of Philippi, sick of life, and was fain to exclaim, “I have worshipped thee, O Liberty, and found thee but a shadow.”

It is thus that all men meet, in the

pathway of human life, the book and the sword, as if evil and good were twin-born, and of necessity proximate. The cloud, which dispenses the refreshing shower, bears the thunder-bolt;—in the path of the breeze, which swells the canvas of fleets and argosies, follows the wild and raging tempest;—in the same heavens, where glows the evening star, awe-struck mortals gaze upon the comet, “coming up from the immeasurable depths below the ecliptic, to double the heaven’s mighty cape, and again to plunge down, with its fiery train, ‘on the long travel of a thousand years.’”

Truth and error lie side by side. Error, indeed, according to a somewhat refined but perfectly defensible theory, is the name of a thing which has in reality no existence; or, as it might be

better expressed, perhaps, a merely negative existence, as the opposite of truth. What is Error? It is the denial, or negation of Truth. We give the name of error to the abnegation of a self-evident or clearly established proposition;—and hence it is the name of what is unreal or imaginary. But it is often necessary to speak of error as having as positive an existence as truth: it is a mode of speech perfectly harmless; no one is led astray by it. It is perfectly understood that the thing which we call error, could no more have a real existence with truth, than the sun could shine, and not shine, at the same moment. As we mean by darkness the absence of light, so we mean by error the negation of truth. This being understood, I repeat, that truth and error lie side by side. The

former is, in some sort, the predicate of the latter,—not the true—but mistaken as such. Error is truth misconceived ;—or it is truth perverted ;—or it is truth denied. Truth may be likened to a beautiful and perfect picture, which would be marred by a single additional touch of the pencil, or, equally so if one should be taken away, which it had already received. Thus perfect, it admits of no addition—no variation. Error, ever varying and shifting, according to the perverting influences operating upon human minds, may be likened to pictures in which there is an approach to this faultless standard, through various gradations, down to the most unseemly daubs or disgusting monstrosities. Now, it is so much like truth, that the unpractised critic pronounces

it to be such. Now, it is a mere caricature, at which men laugh. Now, it is hideous, and men stand appalled. Or, to change the figure; the mind of the errorist is like the lens by which the philosopher illustrates the effect of refraction; we see upon the *slide* a well-formed picture, but the image thrown upon the wall is grotesque and distorted.

It is true, then, that in the grossest absurdities, it is not impossible to detect some dim outline of truth. Truth was the starting point—or it was indistinctly seen as the goal. The thirsty traveller upon the burning desert, when he descries the *mirage*, a well-known optical illusion, deceives himself so far as to imagine that he hears the sound of water; his eye rests upon something which so closely resembles

the cooling element, that his ear joins, as it were, in the conspiracy against him, and tantalizes him with the sound of waves or of brooks.

In speaking of credulity, I am necessarily to speak of error. There is an intimate relation between them; the same relation that exists between truth and faith. As truth is the pabulum or aliment of faith, so is error of credulity. Nor shall I confine myself to those errors which lie close upon the domains of truth, and which it requires a close discrimination to detect, but shall exercise the liberty of roving at large over the whole empire, selecting whatever may be deemed adapted to the purposes in view.

§ I. NATURE AND SOURCE OF CREDULITY.

It is curious to notice how the law of contrast pervades the universe. We see it in inanimate nature; the everlasting hills, the unenduring clouds; the rocky promontory against which a thousand tempests have beat, the ever flowing, unstable sea; the blooming, fruitful valley, and the dreary, verdureless *sahara*. In animate nature,—the eagle, soaring to the clouds and turning his undazzled eye upon the blazing sun, the sightless mole burrowing in the earth; the light-footed hare, the stately elephant, making earth tremble beneath his tread; the noble horse, the gluttonous sloth; man, and all inferior orders of creatures. The same law of contrast reaches also to things which have no animate or material existence, and of which the

mind alone takes cognizance. Thus we have beauty and deformity; courage and fear; love and hatred; virtue and vice; honor and dishonor; faith and credulity.

In answer to the question, What is credulity? it will help us first to inquire, What is faith? not in its theological and restricted sense, but in its general acceptation. Faith is belief of the truth; or it is the assent of the mind to what is declared by another, on probable and sufficient evidence. Credulity, on the contrary, is the assent of the mind to a proposition or declaration of another, on insufficient evidence, or no evidence at all. It is easiness of belief. Faith is our duty, our privilege; it is a state of mind which results from the exercise of the highest intellectual powers. Credu-

lity is a fault, a weakness; and is the fruitful source of mortification and unhappiness to men.

Whence comes credulity? What is its source—its spring? How comes it to pass that man, endowed with the gift of reason, has been the victim of so many impostures and superstitions? Whence comes it that each successive generation has presented a new growth of delusions, or has been signalized by the *anastasis* of old ones, long since defunct? Whence, that we should hardly have returned from celebrating the obsequies of one fanaticism when a new one springs up, like Venus from the froth of the sea, or Minerva all steel-clad, with helmet and visor, struck from the brains of the Olympian Jove? A man cannot be spared to the age of threescore, without being a witness

to the rise and explosion of successive popular delusions equal to quite half the number of his years.

Credulity, which I have shown is a perversion of the principle of faith, arises from neglecting to demand probable and sufficient evidence in favor of what is proposed to our credence. If it were not for this neglect, there could be no such thing as credulity, and of course no such things as superstition, fanaticism, and imposture. But men love excitement, and if destitute of the principles and noble aims which are adapted to impart agreeable and wholesome animation to life, they seek for something which shall break up its dull and spiritless monotony. And it is true of others, also, that the love of excitement and novelty results from their peculiar physical temperament.

If new things do not present themselves, they are at no loss to devise new things. They are not satisfied with the staidness of the past. If they encounter any thing which bears upon it a little ancient dust or a wrinkle of age, they appear not to be satisfied until they have defiled, by putting it beneath their feet. They are the new bottles, into which the old wine must not be put. In addition to this, the love of the marvellous predisposes to credulousness. There is in man a religious element or instinct; he believes that there is a Divinity above him, and a futurity before him. He believes there is a spiritual world; nor can he convince himself that there are not unseen spirits about his path by day and his pillow by night, or that they have not a ministry in regard to him;

and hence it is, even although he may have received some measure of intellectual culture, that he cannot wholly disenthral himself from the influence of omens and auguries; but declines

“To the traditionary sympathies
Of a most rustic ignorance, and takes
A fearful apprehension from the owl
Or death-watch,—and doth as readily rejoice
If two auspicious magpies cross his way.”

It is this love for what is new and marvellous which is the secret of the success of the enthusiast and impostor. They have always been able to find hearers and believers enough, however gross their absurdities. Let them, e. g., stoutly contend that the earth does not revolve upon its axis, and that the sky is an opaque ceiling, like the dome of a temple, and the planets, not orbs, like our earth, but only apertures for

the passage of light, in this immense roof,—or that the world is built upon a foundation of solid mason work, and they will not want for disciples. But perhaps this easiness of belief would be more signally displayed in instances of religious imposture. Let a man pretend that an angel has visited him, or that he has dug up a golden bible containing a new revelation, or that he hears voices in the night-season revealing things new and future, or that he has found out some new mode of interpreting the Scriptures, by which he has learned that the world is about to be jostled from its orbit, or burned up; let him work on the popular sympathies, by addressing the fears and hopes of men, by dealing out woes and anathemas, and telling them that their eternal salvation is at stake, and he

will soon number his proselytes by thousands and tens of thousands. This indeed is a humiliating picture of human nature, but it is not more humiliating than it is true; and it is humiliating because it is true.

§ II. IMPOSTURES IN SCIENCE.

It is a mistaken idea that science—even the most exact science—presents an enclosure into which it is impossible for imposture to obtain entrance. “*Mathematical conclusion*,” says the callow skeptic, the mere fledgeling, (and he does but repeat the stale arguments of the full-grown parents of the brood,) “*Mathematical conclusion puts all skepticism at defiance. Give us such proofs in favor of revelation as accompany physical science.*” When if he had the slightest knowledge of

the history of natural science, he would not need to be told that its foundations, even in its most important departments, were laid in the crudest theories and the most puerile conceits, and that the investigations which have led to some profound discoveries were prosecuted under the most superstitious, and even fanatical notions. Does it need to be told that mere star-gazers and fortune-tellers were the first teachers of Astronomy? Such were the Astrologers of Babylon, Egypt, and Persia. The Astrology of Babylon was little else than the art of divination. The professors of this science were called upon equally with the magicians and sorcerers to interpret dreams and foretell future events. It was for no higher purpose than this, that the record of those ancient observations was made,

that agree so accurately with the most perfect modern tables. Cicero describes them as foretelling events and individual fates, by the position of the stars; and Diodorus says, "these most ancient of the Babylonians had the rank of priests, and were especially famous for Astrology. Besides being peculiarly addicted to divination, they predicted the future." It was the province of the Science of Astrology to teach the Soothsayer to read the language of the stars, by their different aspects and positions. To tell the fortunes of a person, they drew a mystic circle, called the horoscope, representing the twelve signs of the zodiac, and in which was marked the disposition of the heavens at a given time, and then from the position of the stars at the time of his birth, they professed to

foretell his good or ill success in any given enterprise, of war, love, or revenge. Such was the superstition connected with the early history of the Science of Astronomy; and such it has been to within a comparatively recent period.

“Chaldean shepherds, ranging trackless fields,
Beneath the concave of unclouded skies,
Spread like the sea in boundless solitude,
Looked on the Polar Star, as on a guide
And guardian of their course that never closed
His steadfast eye. The Planetary Five
With a submissive reverence they beheld;
Watched from the centre of their sleeping flocks
Those radiant Mercuries, that seemed to move
Carrying thro’ Ether, in perpetual round,
Decrees and resolutions of the gods;
And by their aspects signifying works
Of dim futurity to man revealed.”

So likewise that wonderful and useful science which takes the diversified and complicated phenomena of

the external world, in a state of continued alteration, analyzes and arranges them, and deduces general laws from their analogies,—I refer to Chemistry,—had its origin in the superstitious and mercenary object of searching for the philosopher's stone. The infatuated alchemist, in some garret, or dilapidated tower, a common tenant with bats and owls, day after day, and night after night, sat over his crucible, employed in oft repeated and laborious experiments, to discover that strange and powerful substance which it had been fabulously represented would turn all it should touch into gold. Neither the fruitless toil of years, nor the sickness of long deferred hope abated his ardor. Still the smoke of his furnace rose, and his retort and alembic were patiently plied,

cheered on by the hope of the golden reward which the discovery of the magical stone would put into his possession. Some poet has skilfully painted the dying scene of the poor infatuated alchemist. It is midnight. We see him in his old forsaken tower, a dry and shrivelled man. The storm is beating without; ever and anon, the crazy unfastened shutter clatters, and dashes against the casement. Over a few expiring embers, the faint old man sits with a steady gaze upon his crucible, heeding not and unconscious of the uproar of the elements without. The morning dawns; the embers have expired; but still he is there, motionless, with glazed eye fixed, and his skeleton hand stretched out to the crucible, as if impatient to grasp the long, but vainly expected

object of his mercenary desire. *Death has claimed his prize!*

The philosopher's stone, or tincture, or powder, as it is variously called, was supposed to consist of those elementary particles, which it was maintained that gold contains for the reproduction of itself. "Gold," it was said, like other things in nature, "has its seed within itself, though bound up with inconceivable firmness, from the vigor of innate fixed salts and sulphur." Such was the credulity of alchemists, by whose labors the foundation of one of the most useful sciences was laid. But it did not stop here; in addition to abundance of wealth, they aimed at nothing less than the discovery of a substance, which would secure length of days, nay, perpetuity of life to those who might

possess it. They maintained that there were diffused throughout nature, certain elements of vitality, which, being evolved and concentrated by chemical processes, would constitute, *The Elixir Vitæ*—a charmed potion, which could be applied against bodily disease and decay, and thus despoil the grave of his tribute and death of his prey. But these men were not merely the dupes of a blind credulity, in searching into problems and theses strictly scientific—they often exhibited the wild frenzy of the fanatic. They believed that the knowledge which they sought was “a part of that cabalistical wisdom which God revealed to Adam to console him for the loss of paradise; to Moses in the bush; and to Solomon in a dream.” They believed that demons were their great-

est enemies, and that it was their malign agency which prevented them from discovering the wonderful secrets which would fill the world with golden treasures, convert it into a paradise, confer upon man exemption from disease, and a terrestrial immortality.

“But the author of the *Principia* has lived—the great Sir Isaac—and such crudities as obtained prevalence, in the dark ages, are at an end.” Would that it were so! Would that that mighty genius had been able to exorcise the evil spirit of imposture from the scientific world! But what shall we think when a new tournament in the domains of philosophy is heralded, and that by a legislator* of the American Congress, represented to be skilled in mathematical

* Hon. Mr. Young of Vermont.

science, who promises to show that the Newtonian theory of gravitation is not true, and that "its adoption has reduced almost the whole science of astronomy to that of exploring for equations whereby to reconcile the eternal truths of nature, based upon immutable laws, with human error?"

What pretended discoveries are about to be published to the world it is impossible to say ; but if the principle of universal gravitation is to be the *point d'appui*, it is not difficult to predict the result. The proposal sounds very much like an attempt to revive the doctrines of the "*Principia of Moses*," and the "*Treatise of power, essential and mechanical*." The author of these works, the celebrated Hutchinson, undertook to confute Sir Isaac Newton's principles of gravity, attraction, infi-

nite vacuity, and projection. And in the first named of these works, "*Moses's Principia*," he went so far as to undertake to prove that the Hebrew Scriptures, rightly translated and understood, comprise a perfect system of natural philosophy, which explains mechanical principles in a manner diametrically opposite to the Newtonian theory. As an instance of the perfection of knowledge of this kind, to be met with in the Scriptures, he averred that the loadstone and its effects, are at least six times directly spoken of; and that the reason and the cause of the mysterious phenomena of magnetism are clearly to be gathered from *the revealed philosophy*. In relation to the solar system, the Hutchinsonian theory appears, so far as it is capable of explanation, to be

this. God at first created a subtle fluid in the condition of fire, light, or air; the sun is a vast collection of this fluid, in the action of fire, and which sends forth, in perpetual streams of light, this same subtle matter melted down or rarefied, to the circumference of the system. According to this theory, there are perpetual fluxes or tides of this subtle fluid in every direction, from the centre to the circumference, mechanically producing the constant revolution of the earth and the planets upon their axes and around the sun. Further, it maintains that the opposite motions of light pressing towards the circumference, and the air pressing towards the centre with immense force (the necessary consequence of the melting heat of the sun), which keep up this uninterrupted flux of mat-

ter, will account for almost all the effects and phenomena in nature—motion without projection; solidification of matter; the variation of times and seasons; in short, all the effects usually ascribed to gravity or attraction. All this, Hutchinson boldly taught is clearly revealed in the Scriptures, and that it would have been impossible for man to have found out the mechanism of nature in any other way. To establish his scheme, it was necessary for him to maintain that the knowledge of the philosophy revealed to Moses was lost at the time of the Babylonish captivity, when the pure Hebrew passed out of common usage; and that the Septuagint is for this reason imperfect; and that all Christian translations are still further vitiated in consequence of the pointing in

the Hebrew writings, which he represents to be a modern invention, contrived by the Jews to favor their own interpretations. Thus, to meet the incredulity of skeptics founded on an apparent want of philosophical exactness in the Bible, did Hutchinson, possessed of fine powers as he unquestionably was, become to the world an eminent example of a weak credulity.* But

To meet the skepticism founded on the apparent mistakes in Natural Philosophy, alleged to be discoverable in the Holy Scriptures, we need no other argument, than that they were not written to teach us philosophy, but Religion; and that in the passages in

* For a clear account of the principles of Hutchinsonianism, vid. "*A Letter to a Bishop*," by the Hon. Duncan Forbes.

question, the expressions are employed, *ad captum humanum*, i. e. accommodated to the understanding, and as far as the mechanism of nature is concerned, to the popular notions of those to whom they were addressed. The believer in divine revelation has no reason to fear the progress of philosophy; for every well established advance in science hitherto, instead of casting suspicion, has served to confirm and throw new light upon the word of God.

But not to detain our subject. The science of Magnetism is one of the most interesting departments of natural philosophy. It remains, however, precisely in that immature state, that would favor any attempt to impose, by intricate and skilfully managed imposture, upon the credulity of the

public. In connection with this subject, a recent attempt has been made, to build up a theory, which, in one important respect, resembles that of Hutchinson, but its authors and advocates possess not half his learning, and none of his piety. According to this theory, the true system of nature is taught, or at least, may be inferred from the Scriptures. The manner, however, in which they treat the Scriptures, is not only irreverent, but absolutely profane. Let us first, however, take a glance at the doctrines of this newest of the schools. Their particular scope lies, in applying recent discoveries in Magnetism, to explain certain phenomena in Astronomy and Geology. The creation and spherical form of the earth, and the celestial bodies, is accounted for in

this way. The opposite forces of repulsion and attraction impart to atoms of matter in space, motion in a circle; the sides of this circle accumulate other matter, and becoming wider and contracting at the edges, at length form a hollow sphere. If you complain that this is not sufficiently intelligible, let the cause be found in the fact that it cannot be made more so. The theory lacks evidence; or rather, there is too much proof that it is ridiculously absurd. For has the earth by its increased bulk lost the force of attracting to it atoms of floating matter? If not, how are we to account for it, that the dimensions of its diameter and circumference have remained unaltered for thousands of years; or, which is the same thing, that the superficies and general face of the oldest conti-

nents have remained the same since the days of the flood? I do not intend to expose the absurdities and puerile conceits of this scheme. I have space only to present its general outlines; you will readily perceive in what a variety of points it is in conflict with the most settled principles of true science. Strange to say, that gaping crowds in our commercial metropolis, flocked to listen to this farrago, and numbers stuck not at gulping it down, although they well knew that they were receiving it from the renowned author of the Moon hoax.—But to proceed;—hear this new light account for the centrifugal force: he does it with all the ease and grace as if born, not with a silver spoon in his mouth, but a telescope at his eye, and a Planetarium,

already invented in his hand. Copernicus, Newton, Kepler, Laplace, hide your diminished heads, while this sapient philosopher, the quondam editor of a penny paper, and—greenest of all other laurels—author of the Moon hoax, rises not like “the morning star tricked with new beams,” but “like another sun risen on mid-noon,” to solve the mystery of the centrifugal force. “We shall perceive that two forces may come from one sun, just as two forces may come from one magnet. We might perceive that the sun has two magnetic poles as we know the earth has. (Ah! you have reached this grand postulate, easily, and too suddenly Mr. Locke; it is the point upon which your whole theory turns; and we demand proof, PROOF; this is the very *quod est demonstrandum*,

and not to be dismissed with that *learned*, we might perceive!") If then the sun have a north and south pole also, and the south pole of the sun be toward the north pole of the earth, and the north pole of the sun be toward the south pole of the earth, (if, IF, IF more hypothesis without proof Mr. L****) this is all we require, (true enough,) all that is necessary to keep the planet in the course which it now pursues, and to give a magnetic organization to every particle it contains."* How conclusive! And how facile! Where could have been all the acumen of Sir Isaac and Laplace? Such is the nonsense which it is sought to engraft upon the tree of science. It is thus that the centri-

* Lect. on Magnetism and Astronomy, p. 2, by R. A. Locke. Greeley and McElrath, New-York.

fugal force, the grand miracle of the universe, the sublime argument for the existence of a God, is explained.

We have not space to present this gentleman's doctrine of what he calls the "grand periodical mutation in the position of the earth's axis towards the sun, which has occasioned the most momentous changes that have occurred in the history of our planet, and in the condition of its inhabitants and productions through vast cycles of time."* Suffice it to say that it is marked by the same conceits, and the same assuming for postulates, doubtful hypotheses, and even glaring absurdities. On one point this gentleman went so far as clearly to identify himself to be the author of the Moon hoax—an honor which I believe he

* Ibid. p. 5.

has no disposition to disclaim, but rather plumes himself upon—and the wonder is that his hearers in spite of it all, should have allowed themselves to be more egregiously gulled, even, than were his readers. In speaking of the influence of the two magnetic poles of the earth he says, “we see another operation of these two forces in the human mind, where the law of attraction and repulsion holds good. All our mental processes are in obedience to it. Our very ideas are attracted and repelled.” And as though this were not enough he carries it into Algebra. “All algebraic and arithmetical operations, from the most simple to the most elaborate, are either negative, or positive, or both ; increasing or decreasing, contracting or expanding.” And he even applies his

doctrine to the procreation and death of the human species. "A man will die," says he, "if you destroy the polarity of the brain by knocking him on the head." And yet all this pitiful, disgusting trifling went down with a New-York audience. That no truth is to be found in this strange medley I do not assert; for it was necessary to have sufficient truth, in order more effectually to draw a veil over the eyes of the sciolists, and that numerous tribe who would be credulous enough to instal a renowned hoaxer as their professor of all science; and who, if he should fall in his enterprise of quixotism, would canonize him with the martyrs of science. Solomon speaks of jewels in a swine's snout; and jewels have sometimes been found upon a dunghill; but let not men for

this reason shovel the whole heap into their coffers, and weigh it out as they would gold.

But I have spoken of the irreverent and profane interpretation of the Scriptures, by the advocates of this theory; some of them indeed are blasphemous, so much so as to lead me to scruple in regard to bringing them to your notice. And I will not conceal that they have led me to the opinion that the Lecture which has been under review, was put forth more for the purpose of propagating infidelity, than with the desire of advancing true science. The sublime and awful mystery of the incarnation is thus travestied and degraded. “And may I not venture to add* that this theory of creation”—by the two opposite magnetic forces—

* Ibid. p. 4.

“is beautifully revived and illustrated in the Christian creed, of an incarnate principle, proceeding from two spiritual ones, and in the mystical symbol of the equilateral triangle, so profoundly revered by the ancient nations?” The doctrine of the Trinity is thus put on the same footing with the symbolical equilateral triangle of the Egyptians. The doctrine of the temptation of our first parents he reduces to a mere allegory. By the tree of life he understands “the magnetic axis of the earth ;” and by the tree of knowledge of good and evil, “the axis of rotation.” By the serpent which tempted our mother Eve, he understands, “not a snake of any genus or species, but the serpentine or spiral motion of the earth’s axis, under the influence of the magnetic poles.” And

in the Apocalypse, he maintains that we have the very astronomical numbers, by which this spiral motion of the earth's axis is regulated. He makes the number 666, the number of the beast which John saw coming up out of the earth, the grand key for ascertaining the mean diameter of the sun.* But enough and too much of this profane trifling. The author, with perhaps the feeling of disappointed ambition, (and what an ambition, to become the hoaxer-general of the age!) that his labors as a lecturer were not so fully appreciated as his labors as and editor, in publishing to the world certain new discoveries in the moon, has seen fit to retire to his learned shades, where, not courting the gaze of the public, he reposes upon the lau-

* Ibid. p. 7.

rels, so gloriously, (shall I say ?) or so ingloriously won.

We pass now to *Medical Empiricism*, an almost exhaustless source of illustration to prove that credulity is a natural characteristic of the human mind. The history of medical quackery proves that, so far as the healing art is concerned, a credulous disposition has not been confined to the ignorant ; the learned and the rich have taken common share in the delusions which have found their dupes in every age. Pyrrhus, king of Epirus, as related by Pliny, cured the hypochondria by pressing his right foot upon the side of the patient. This was not manipulation exactly ; but it might be called *pedipulation*, and I wonder that the art has not been revived by some modern practitioner.

To accomplish marvellous cures, has, at different times, appeared to be classed among the royal prerogatives. Edward III., and other princes of the blood royal, cured, by the touch of the hand, scrofulous tumors, called from this circumstance "the King's Evil." Charles II. touched many thousands of persons for the king's evil. And Austrian princes were accustomed to cure the same disease by giving a glass of wine to the patient with their own hand.

An Italian professor of mathematics in 1797, cured the toothache by impregnating the fingers with a healing virtue derived from squeezing a dozen bugs between the thumb and finger, and then applying them to the face of the patient. In 1798, Perkins introduced his famous metallic tractors,

two small pieces of pointed metal, which were gently passed over the surface of the diseased parts of the body. Astonishing was his fame; tens of thousands believed they were cured. In a very few years, the avails of his practice in England alone amounted to \$50,000. It was soon discovered, however, that wooden tractors, or even none at all would do just as well, if the patient could only be made to believe or imagine that he was cured. Men are fond of the marvellous and willing to be cheated. Let a medicine be recommended by an Indian juggler, and in the view of multitudes it is more valuable than if it was a recipe from Galen himself; while at the same time the regular practitioner, the errands of whose laborious profession no storms must arrest, however

successful in his treatment of diseases, receives but little credit. What a wonderful personage in the estimation of some is the cancer doctor. Somebody is troubled by a harmless tumor. The doctor is summoned. With an air of wisdom and a certain mysterious something, adapted to work upon the superstition of his patient, he examines, and with all gravity he pronounces it—a *cancer*. But—" *I can cure it,*" adds he. Thanks to the good man. Now for the caustic. One is applied to the tumor, and another to the patient's pocket, and just as the latter has been nearly eaten out, he concludes to remove the caustic from the tumor, and cure the sore. The farce closes by the duped and plundered man presenting to his benefactor a certificate, duly signed sealed and de-

livered, running somewhat after the following fashion :—" I, A. B., having been afflicted, etc., do certify that the celebrated Dr. Escharotic, inventor, etc., cured me of a cancer, after other physicians had declared me incurable." This is gazetted far and near. What cartloads, nay shiploads of Brandreth's pills, and others equally efficacious by his fellow craftsmen, are swallowed every year! Great excitement and alarm sometimes prevails on account of hydrophobia, but we have reason to believe, as has been truly said, that more deaths are annually occasioned by the nostrums of empirics, than occur in twenty years from the bite of mad dogs.

I cannot pass from this branch of the subject—the impostures connected with science—without noticing the recent

attempt to revive the doctrines of Mesmer, or Animal Magnetism. It is but a few years since, that a well known and worthy gentleman, who rejoices in a military *soubriquet*, the editor of a highly respected journal printed in the city of New-York, published a letter on Animal Magnetism, in which he says, he was at Providence, R. I., and that while there he saw a young woman, who, while she was yet present and conversing with him, visited New-York, and saw and described things which she had never seen before, and even of the existence of which she was totally ignorant. The Colonel was not alone; physicians, lawyers, clergymen, were ready to corroborate his statements, or to certify to similar ones. Marvellous credulity! but not more marvellous than true.

Animal Magnetism, its advocates contend, is of the most ancient date. But it was not until the time of Mesmer, a German, that it attracted much notice. In 1778 he published a book at Paris, containing an account of his system. It rose rapidly into notoriety, and at length the king of France appointed a commission to inquire into its merits. This commission was composed of the most eminent philosophers, among whom was the illustrious Franklin, then at the French court. They reported against it, and it was supposed the claims of Animal Magnetism had been settled forever, and its founder proved an adventurous though successful impostor. But we have lived to see the reviviscence of this delusion. "Animal Magnetism is defined to be a particular state of the

nervous system, in which certain physiological phenomena hitherto unknown, present themselves—a state ordinarily produced by the will of the magnetiser, sometimes assisted by certain manual evolutions. This state is supposed to be brought about by the immediate agency of a fluid or emanation passing from one individual into another.” While in this state the person in the magnetic sleep, is under the direction of the will of the magnetiser; and can see with the eyes closed and bandaged, and can be conducted to the most remote and unknown places, and describe the scenes; can discover the internal diseases of himself, and others, e. g. affections of the heart, the liver, and the lungs—and prescribe suitable remedies for them: and more marvellous, if possible, than

all, can see, taste, &c., with the pit of the stomach. Why should we hesitate to affirm that this bears *prima facie* evidence of being an imposture? Many of the laws which govern the human system have been definitely ascertained. That light is necessary to vision, and that the eye is the organ of vision, are facts too well known for any man to venture to call them in question, without the danger of being regarded either as a madman or a fool. When men, therefore, begin to talk of seeing with their elbows, or from the back of their heads, or from the pit of their stomach—of seeing from Providence to New-York, into an Editor's "den," and sighing at the sight of a new-bought *Ecce Homo*, shall we stop to reason upon the subject? or shall we not at once pro-

nounce it a downright imposture? I care not how many eye-witnesses you may bring to prove that the sun does not shine at noonday, for I have more respect for my own senses than to accuse them of falsehood. If we know any thing, we know that there are certain fixed, established laws of nature, and if we cannot convince ourselves of this, we had better adapt the Berkleian theory at once, that there is no such thing as an external world, and that we ourselves have only an imaginary existence—are mere ideas—and that when we sit down to a savory joint it is all an imaginary process. If a man tells me that a rose has no beauty and no fragrance, that gold is not yellow, and is not heavy, I would not disgrace my physical senses, nor my common sense

by debating with him: I would pity him as a brain-sick man ;—and so if a man tells me he can see with the pit of his stomach, while I should wish to treat him with all due courtesy, I should think, if I did not say, that he was either an impostor or a dupe.

Separate the results of experiments in Animal Magnetism, from what evidently belongs to imposture, and they may easily be explained on philosophical principles ; they may be attributed partly to imagination, and in part to sympathetic imitation. In some cases of somnambulism, it would appear that the power of sight may be so increased, “ by certain kinds of cerebral and nervous excitement,” that objects may be discovered by the aid of that small quantity of light,

which is known to pass through the closed eyelid, or through a bandage of many folds."

But not to debate the subject further: animal magnetism seems already to be passing into another syncope—travelling mountebanks and beardless boys have become its high priests; and it is not impossible that after another half century, some juggler will have the temerity to disinter it and hold it up as a nine-days wonder to sciolists, and that numerous tribe who always stand prepared for marvels. Meanwhile, nature will keep on her course; the great law of universal gravitation will bind the planets in their orbits; the sun will shine; the rain will fall; and men will continue to be born with bodies and with souls—with minds to think, with ears to hear, and with eyes to see.

§. III. GROSS SUPERSTITION.

We come now to another branch of this subject, *human credulity as exhibited in gross superstition*. Time will not admit of an appeal to those fruitful sources of illustration.—Ancient Paganism, with its divinations and auguries, its Delphic Oracle, and its Statue of Memnon, which is said to have saluted the rising sun with musical notes, and its thirty thousand gods;—the Mahomedan delusion, with the pretended divine communications of its founder, his professed miracles, and the idle fabrication of his coffin being suspended in the air;—the impostures of the church of Rome, its superstitious mummeries, and its avowed miraculous restoration of the sick to health and the dead to life;—omens, prognostics, and a belief in

premonitory dreams, a species of superstition too prevalent even in countries enlightened by science and religion. These must be passed, and attention will be called only to that signal exhibition of credulity obvious in popular superstitions, which we may well rejoice are almost wholly blotted out from civilized and Christian countries, viz., *a belief in spectres and wizards.*

The belief in the existence of spirits, separated from the body, is nearly universal. There is something in man that assures him he has a soul, and whispers that the soul cannot die, but will exist distinct and separate from the body after death. Such ideas arise naturally to the mind, and lead to the further conjecture of the existence of other purely spiritual be-

ings. It is equally natural to suppose that the spirits of men, once active and interested in the pursuits of this world, may linger about the scenes in which they took so prominent a part. Here is the foundation of the superstition of the reappearance of the spirits of men after death. It is difficult to convince an uneducated mind of the philosophical objection to the visible appearance of an abstract disembodied spirit, which "has neither substance, shape, form, voice, or any thing which can render its presence sensible to human faculties." "There are many ghost-stories," says Sir Walter Scott,* which we do not feel at liberty to challenge as impostures, because we are confident that those who relate them on their own

* Demonology and Witchcraft, Let. X.

authority actually believe what they assert. It is easy to suppose that the visionary has been imposed upon, by a lively dream, a waking revery, the excitation of a powerful imagination, or the misrepresentation of a diseased organ of sight; and in one or the other of these causes, (to say nothing of a system of deception, which may in many instances be probable,) we apprehend a solution will be found for all cases of what are called real ghost-stories."

There are various spectral illusions which physicians and writers on disordered mental action, have shown to be produced by disease. The senses thus become the agents of deception. Disordered sensation and perception, in cases of fever, inflammation of the brain, and hysteria, are not unfre-

quently attended by apparitions or spectral illusions. The invalid sees, or thinks he sees, trees, houses, animals, some deceased friend, or perhaps, enemy.

And sometimes "violent and inordinate passions originating in sorrow for the loss of friends, remorse for crimes, eagerness of patriotism, or deep sense of devotion," may betray a credulous person into the belief, that he has seen an inhabitant of the invisible world. At a time of public excitement and alarm, in communities especially where there is great ignorance, stories of such apparitions will be frequent. Credulity at such times, and with such persons, is contagious, and will be fostered by second-hand and entirely inadequate proof. It is not difficult on the above principles

to illustrate the notable instance of the alleged appearance of Cesar's ghost to Brutus. Cesar had been the friend of Brutus. But the good of his country led the patriot to believe, that it was his duty to join in the conspiracy against the life of the Usurper. The death of Cesar was not followed by the results, which this true Roman desired and anticipated. The civil wars continued and were more sanguinary than before. He was on the eve of a battle which he had reason to suppose would decide the fate of his country; he was doubtless familiar with the opinions of the Platonists; the image of his murdered friend, too, would present itself to his mind; fatigued in body, anxious respecting the fate of the impending battle, he laid himself down in his

tent, on the field of Philippi; the darkness and silence would still further excite his imagination, and what followed was nothing more than a lively dream, or a waking revery.

The witchcraft delusion is probably of modern origin. There is reason to believe that the witch of Scripture was nothing more than a divining woman, or soothsayer, and that the witchcraft that arose in the middle ages was unknown under the Mosaic dispensation, and during the apostolic age. The Salem witchcraft is often spoken of in a manner, as if that was the only little spot on the face of the earth, where this delusion prevailed, and the Puritans were the only men ever guilty of persecuting and hanging witches. But instead of this being the fact, we shall find upon inqui-

ry that a belief in witches had prevailed for several centuries, and that Dr. Cotton Mather was not the only credulous man among the learned of his own and several preceding ages. At an early period, in the Roman Catholic church, the punishment of death was assigned to those who were guilty of the sin of witchcraft. Romanists became anxious to connect this delusion with the doctrines of the heretics, and accordingly many of the Waldenses and Albigenses were punished with death on this charge. Near the end of the fifteenth century, Pope Innocent VIII. issued a bull for the punishment of sorcerers and witches. Dreadful were the consequences all over the Continent; forty-one poor women were burned to death in the course of a year by a single in-

quisitor. Another, about the same time, burned one hundred sorcerers in Piedmont. In 1523 the bull of Pope Innocent was again put in force by Adrian VI. In England, during the reign of Queen Elizabeth in 1562, a statute was passed against witchcraft. Under its execution "judges and juries showed a fearful severity." Previous to her reign, under Henry VI., executions took place. Another statute which gave much wider scope to persecutions, was passed in the very first year of King James's reign, who succeeded Elizabeth. The ministers of the church of England encouraged the witch superstition, and the dissenters were not a whit behind. During the temporary popularity of the Presbyterian system in England which grew out of the usurpations of

the high church divines, and the severe persecutions of the star chamber, the persecution of witches went on with unabated fury. After the restoration of Charles II. the superstition continued, and in 1664 the excellent Sir Matthew Hale presided at the trial of two witches, who were condemned to death. Thus we see that the tragedy at Salem, was mere child's play in comparison with what was enacted in England and other parts of Europe. And when that good old Puritan, Cotton Mather, is pointed at as a credulous man, we cannot help reflecting that he is in the same condemnation with the devout and honorable Sir Matthew Hale. The apology of these excellent men is, that a belief in witches was the malady of the times. According to a

recent work entitled "The Bible in Spain," by George Borrow, it appears that this superstition still prevails in that country. And it is said that some remains of it are to be found, even in the highlands of Scotland. Such is the weakness—such the credulity of man.

§. IV. RELIGIOUS ABSURDITY AND EXTRAVAGANCE.

We come now to our last article; the exemplification of the credulous in man found in the fruitful field of religious absurdity and extravagance. And (1,) we have *the credulity of Atheism*. I mean the credulity of doubting or denying the existence of a wise, powerful, and benevolent Creator. It has indeed been strongly argued that the disbelief of the existence of a Supreme Being is impossi-

ble. How wonderful is the evidence of design and creative skill in the planetary system to which our earth belongs! Suppose that in some part of the air, near this earth, within such a distance that the whole scene might be conveniently beheld at one view, there should appear a little globe of pure flaming light resembling that of the sun; and suppose that around this globe, fixed stationary as a centre, there were lesser orbs, but of various sizes, and some of them with a number of satellites, all making their regular and systematic revolutions, with as much exactness as the wheels of a clock—some requiring but a day, others a week, and others a month to complete their revolutions; and suppose that among them we could distinctly descry a minature earth, an

exact copy of our own, beautified with little trees, woods, and flowery fields, and flowing rivulets, with larger lakes into which these discharged themselves, with the two continents as distinctly defined as upon a school atlas, and dotted all over with cities and villages, filled with Lilliputian inhabitants—could we look upon the beautiful creation, and pronounce it all the product of chance? How vast a credulity there is in Atheism!*

We have (2,) *the credulity of skepticism*. There is no solecism in speaking of the credulity of infidelity, for credulity consists as much in refusing to believe what is true, as in blindly receiving what is false. The disbelief of the truth is the grossest error. He who should profess to believe that

* Howe's "Living Temple," Part II. Chap. III.

the sun does not shine, would exhibit as much credulity as he who should avow the belief that our heavens are enlightened by two suns. The idea that the Bible is a fabrication, or an imposture, involves a contradiction, viz., the contradiction, that what is every way agreeable to reason and correct moral feeling should be a forgery. What an amazing credulity must that man possess—equal to the reception of any puerile fantasy, or the wildest chimera—who can believe that falsehood is an element of unsullied goodness—or that such men as wrote the Scriptures—living in different ages of the world—and writing in different languages—men too who loved their species, did unite in a deep-laid scheme to palm off a cunningly devised fable upon the world!

--Look we at *the skeptic's creed*, if such a summary can be found in the ever varying opinions of the skeptical school, nor will our amazement be diminished that men, who lay claim to reason and profess to have a regard for moral purity, should entertain the thought of substituting such conceits and impurities, for the sublime faith and spotless morality of the Living Oracles. The infidel's confession of faith runs somewhat in this manner. Art 1. Death is an eternal sleep, or at least is but a leap into the dark. Art. 2. There is no God, or if there be, it is derogatory to him to suppose that he takes any interest in the minute affairs and concerns of human life. Art. 3. Virtue is the love of ourselves, and there is no merit or crime in intention. Art. 4. The disregard of

chastity is necessary if we would obtain the advantages of life. And so on. Look at the productions of that most subtle and plausible of deistical writers, Hume; they everywhere furnish the *reductio ad absurdum*, against his own favorite arguments. He maintained that the soul of man is not the same this moment that it was the last; that the existence of the external world may be reasonably doubted; that the perfection of human knowledge is to doubt; that God cannot be infinitely wise and good while there is evil in the universe; he admits that miracles may be proved from human testimony, but cannot be proved so as to be the foundation of a religious system.

And if you would see the credulity of the skeptic still farther illustrated look at the tendency of infidelity,

where the experiment of putting its principles in practice has been tried on a large scale. It converted France into one vast slaughter-house—Paris into a Pandemonium—the National Convention into a council of fiends. Virtue and honesty ensured proscription and death. Thrice was the place of the guillotine changed; and at every place holes were dug to receive the blood; yet it ran in gutters. The prisoners were led out by fifties and hundreds; and yet the deputies were enraged at the tardy progress of the work, and caused hundreds to be marched into the outskirts of Paris where they were shot or stabbed. The record of these and more shocking and disgusting atrocities fills a page in the history of that unhappy country, which it curdles

the blood to peruse.—We ask, in view of these things, where rightly lies the charge of credulity, with the believer, or the skeptic? With such men as Grotius, Bacon, Newton, Boyle, Locke, Addison—or with such men as Voltaire, Rousseau, Volney and Gibbon?

The credulity of the fanatic and enthusiast remains to be considered. It is so common, and so much a matter of every day's observation, that it will be unnecessary to draw extensively from the ample materials which exist for its illustration. The principal task will consist in a skilful eclecticism, and in exceeding brevity. In the fifth century arose a sect, called the Pillar Saints. They took their origin from a fanatic who spent a large portion of his life on the tops of different pillars

--the last of which was sixty feet high and about three feet in diameter at the top. For thirty-seven years, night and day, through sunshine and storm, he remained on the top of this pillar, praying and fasting. The multitudes ran together; the maniac devotee, from his lofty summit, addressed them; disciples were multiplied, and began to imitate him; thus was the sect established.—A hermit, about the year 1260, established in Italy a sect called the Flagellants, which spread over almost all Europe. Their religious ceremonies consisted in walking in solemn procession, two and two, whipping their bare shoulders until the blood ran down. In these lacerations, inflicted for the mortification of the flesh, consisted their entire religion. The efforts of the Roman

Catholics to prevent their spread were ineffectual; they continued for about two hundred years. In 1525, Thomas Munzer established himself at the head of a sect in Germany, called the Anabaptists. The vilest impostures and atrocities were committed. At length, emboldened by the multitude who had collected about him, he appealed to the sword against the government; and to excite the enthusiasm of the deluded throng, he predicted, and attempted to convince them from Scripture, that the end of the world was near, that Christ was about to appear to reign personally on earth, and to destroy the wicked. Thousands of these poor peasants fell in battle, the rest were dispersed, and Munzer was slain.—Emanuel Swedenborg was born in Stockholm in

1688. He taught that the Lord had appeared to him personally, and that he had been able to see and converse with spirits for twenty-seven years, and that others might do the same, if they would live in accordance with the laws of their spiritual nature. Multitudes, both in Europe and this country, and some worthy and intelligent men, continue to put faith in his revelations. His writings are not immoral, neither was his life. And it may be added, that comparatively speaking, the Swedenborgian fanaticism is harmless.—Ann Lee and Jemima Wilkinson made their appearance in 1776; the former near Albany, N. Y., and of her sect there remain in different parts of the United States, not far from five thousand. They are called Shakers, from the

shaking or dancing march which constitutes their worship. Jemima Wilkinson made her appearance in New England. She pretended to be perfect; to know all things; to heal diseases, and discern the secrets of the heart; and that she should live a thousand years. Her hypocrisy in failing to walk on the water, as she had promised, and raising a living man, who had been placed in the coffin for that purpose, though fully exposed, did not open the eyes of her deluded followers.—Upon the rhapsodies of the eloquent Irving, for a time the brightest star of the English metropolitan pulpit, we cannot dwell. The victim of a morbid imagination, after shining with a dazzling lustre, he went down in clouds and thick darkness. Poor Irving!—The Mormon

delusion, so rampant in some parts of the West, which boasts a hundred thousand adherents in this country, and ten thousand in Great Britain, is the mammoth delusion of our own times. It appears recently to have come back to its cradle in western New-York, from whence it took its Hegira some ten or twelve years ago, and to be enrolling its dupes among the honest yeomanry of that district. Though it has for its great High-Priest a swindler and ignorant adventurer, such has been its past success, that time alone can determine to what it will grow.—To this catalogue of fanaticisms must be added the excitement which has prevailed in regard to the speedy end of the world. If we can rely upon published statements, it has already produced insan-

ity, suicide, and murder. May a merciful Providence avert still further mischiefs! We can only account for the prevalence of such a delusion among many well-meaning people, that they were not prepared, from a study of chronology, history, and their Bibles, to detect the false reasonings and absurdities by which they have been led astray. It makes a mighty impression when a man comes forward and predicts the end of all things as the result of twenty years' study and patient research. Crowds look up amazed, as though all this history and chronology, and more than all, the magic rule of understanding days to mean years, was a fresh discovery.

"It must be acknowledged of too many," remarks John Foster,* "who

* Popular Ignorance, Chap. VI.

are, in a measure, we may candidly believe, under the genuine efficacy of religion, that they have attained, under its influence, but so diminutive a proportion of the improvement of intellect, that they can be well pleased with a great deal of absurdity of religious notions and language. While, however, we confess and regret that it is so, we should not overlook the obvious causes and excuses for it; partly in the constitution of the mind, partly in extraneous circumstances. Many whose attention is in honest earnestness drawn to religion, are naturally endowed with so scanty a portion of the thinking power, strictly so denominated, that it would have required high cultivation to raise them to the level of very moderate understanding. There are some who appear to have

a natural invincible tendency to an uncouth fantastic mode of forming their notions. It is in the nature of others, that whatever cultivation they might have received, it would still have been by their passions, rather than, in any due proportion, by their reason, that an important concern would have taken and retained hold of them. In the case of too many, there may have been associated with the causes of their first effectual religious impressions, with the instructions and instructors, perhaps, that first drew them into the full interest of the subject, circumstances unfortunately tending to prevent a sound, rational discipline of the understanding, which was coming into exercise on that subject.

“Now suppose all these worthy hyper-

sons, with these circumstances against them, to be also under the one great sad calamity of an utterly neglected education ; and is it any wonder they can receive with approbation, a great deal of what is a heavy disgrace to the name of religious doctrine and ministration ? Where is the wonder that crudeness of conception should not disappoint and offend minds that have not, ten times since they came into the world, been compelled to form two ideas with precision, and then combine them with strictness, beyond the narrow scope of their ordinary pursuits ? Where is the wonder if many such persons take noise and fustian, for something zealous and something lofty ; if they mistake a wheedling cant for affectionate solicitude ; if they defer to pompous egotism and dogma-

tical assertion from the obvious interest, which those who cannot inquire much for themselves, have to believe their teacher is an oracle ; if they are delighted with whimsical conceits as strokes of discovery and surprise, and yet at the same time are pleased with common-place, and endless repetition, as an exemption from mental effort ; and if they are gratified by vulgarity of diction and illustration, as bringing religion to the level where they are at home ? Nay, if an artful pretender, or half lunatic visionary, or some poor set of dupes of their own inflated self-importance, should give out that they are come into the world for the manifestation, at least, of true Christianity which the divine revelation has failed, till their advent, to explain to any of the numberless devout

and sagacious examiners of it, what is there in the minds of the most ignorant class of the persons desirous to secure the benefits of religion, that can be relied on to certify them, that they shall not forego the greatest blessing ever offered to them by setting at nought these pretensions ?”

A dark and painful chapter in human nature has been presented. And well may the inquiry be excited, in what direction shall we look for a remedy. Shall fanaticism and credulity destroy our confidence in all forms of faith, Christianity not excepted ? So would the skeptic reason. But let it be remembered that the same argument would strike as powerfully against sciences founded on mathematical demonstration, as against revelation. Let education, combined with sound in-

struction in revealed religion, be diffused. Let the guardians of youth spare no exertions to disenthral their minds, or to keep them disenthralled from the iron bondage of superstition and fanaticism; let them especially endeavor to produce and foster in them a calm and settled reliance upon the supreme Ruler of the universe.

“ Shall enmity and strife,” asks the poet Wordsworth,—

———“ Shall enmity and strife,
“ Falsehood and guile be left to sow their seed;
“ And the kind never perish? Is the hope
“ Fallacious, or shall righteousness obtain
“ A peaceable dominion, wide as earth,
“ And ne’er to fail? Shall that blest day arrive
“ When they whose choice or lot it is to dwell
“ In crowded cities, without fear shall live
“ Studious of mutual benefit; and he,
“ Whom morning wakes among sweet dews and,
 flowers
“ Of every clime, to till the lovely field,

“ Be happy in himself?—The law of faith
“ Working thro’ love, such conquest shall it gain,
“ Such triumph over sin and guilt achieve?—



